

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom voices its strong concern over the People's Republic of China's new regulations requiring government approval of "Living Buddhas," which goes into effect on Saturday, Sept. 1. The regulations are clearly designed to undermine the influence of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetans' preeminent spiritual leader, and constitute continuing state violation of internationally guaranteed religious freedom rights in China.

The measures elaborate on Article 27 of China's National Regulations on Religious Affairs issued in March 2005. The new regulations instruct all reincarnate Tibetan lamas to "respect and protect the principles of unification of the state" and declare that no "foreign organization or individual" shall "interfere" in the process of recognizing or enthroning Living Buddhas. In cases where reincarnate lamas have "a relatively large impact," "a great impact," or "a particularly great impact," the regulations state, it is necessary to obtain approval from the provincial or regional governments, the national State Administration of Religious Affairs, or from the State Council, the highest government body in China.

"The Chinese government's policy of suppressing religious freedom in Tibet, including its denial of the right of Tibetan Buddhists to select their own religious leaders, again demonstrates Beijing's violation of international covenants recognizing the basic right of religious communities to choose their religious leaders and teachers," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "China continues to pursue unacceptable policies repressing Tibetan Buddhists."

The 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief specifically includes the freedom to “appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders” as part of the internationally protected right to freedom of religion or belief. It also explicitly protects the right to communicate with co-religionists abroad.

The most blatant instance of Chinese interference in the selection of reincarnate Tibetan lamas occurred in 1995, when Gendun Choekyi Nyima, the boy recognized by the Dalai Lama as the 11th Panchen Lama, was taken into custody following his enthronement. Government authorities selected another boy, whom most Tibetan Buddhists do not accept as the legitimate Panchen Lama. Nyima, who would now be 18, has not been seen since, in spite of numerous official requests from foreign governments and international monitors to meet with him.

The new regulations signal Beijing's awareness of the influence that reincarnate lamas retain among Tibetan communities throughout China. Earlier this year, government officials in Qinghai and Sichuan provinces required several Tibetan Buddhist monks to sign statements renouncing their loyalty to the Dalai Lama. The abbot of a large monastery in Qinghai was forced to step down after refusing to sign such a statement, Radio Free Asia reported in May. At the same time, other monasteries where monks agreed to sign the pledge were rewarded by allowing them to bring in greater numbers of monks to study.

The new regulations will carry a high political and diplomatic cost for China, not least because they further complicate negotiations between the Chinese government and the Special Envoy of the Dalai Lama. The U.S. Department of State has urged the Chinese government to make a good-faith effort in the negotiations to resolve questions on the status of Tibet in order to prevent ethnic tensions in the region from deepening. Yet the new regulations overtly aim at severing current allegiances to the Dalai Lama and controlling them in the future.

The new regulations in Tibet have implications for Catholics in China as well. Article 27 of the National Regulations on Religious Affairs also reserves the right of the Chinese government to choose Catholic bishops, a right that the Vatican stresses cannot be devolved to institutions outside the Catholic Church.

“The Chinese government's insistence that it select Catholic bishops is a violation of

China's international obligations and further sets back any rapprochement between the 'unregistered' and 'official' Catholic Churches in China," Cromartie said.

Promulgation of the new regulations on reincarnate lamas comes amid broader Chinese efforts to control religious activity. Other signs of repression include: the imposition of new restrictions targeting Uighur Muslims taking part in the Hajj and an increase in official rhetoric tying terrorism to Islam; a newly instituted "strike hard" campaign by the Ministry of Public Security ordering crackdowns on unregistered Protestant house churches and "illegal cults"; and government collection of personal information on Falun Gong practitioners, Evangelical Protestants, and others who practice their religion outside the confines of state-allied institutions. Some of these efforts are clearly tied to preparations for next year's Olympics, when government and state-allied religious officials fear contact with foreign co-religionists could encourage a flowering of officially unsanctioned religious practice.

"In violation of international human rights standards, China continues to use its National Regulations on Religious Affairs and specious security claims to curtail the religious freedom of tens of millions of its citizens," Cromartie said. "A year before the Olympics, Beijing is ratcheting up pressure on and surveillance of peaceful religious communities, using measures that violate international human rights standards and damage China's international prestige."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie

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